

# The Lesbian Internet

by [Eva Isaksson](#)

The Internet is taking over communicative roles held so far by tv, radio, telephone, faxes, postal letters, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and books. While not all of us can get access to it, it is becoming a powerful tool for building both social and activism oriented connections and networks between lesbians.

What resources, if any, exist for lesbians exploring the Internet? The basic e-mail, or exchange of electronic mail very swiftly is still the most important feature. Apart from private mail exchanges, there are mail distribution systems called mailing lists that serve as newsletters when they are used to distributing information, and as discussion forums when used for social chat or debate. They differ from newsletters in their openness and immediacy: anyone who is a subscriber can send mail to the list address, and thus everyone else on the list will get a copy of her "posting" almost immediately.

The other well-known feature is www, or the world wide web, consisting of information stored as hypertext. Accessing www has until recently been difficult, as the graphical browsers require fast connections and powerful enough equipment. However, its power lies in the fact that almost every Internet user can become a www publisher, so that organisations can easily produce information ("homepages") that is accessible from all over the globe with a computer connected to the net.

While Internet is not hierarchical in the sense we have grown used to, and while your sex or gender do not always carry the same meaning that they do in 'real life', the fact remains that women are still a minority (although a growing one) among Internet users. Lesbian voices are not always very noticeable in the areas with high volume of general discussion. There are general gay discussion forums open to everyone which women can join, too, but special lesbian oriented, women only mailing lists have been the preferred way by which many lesbians choose to communicate on the Internet.

It is certain that there are some national traditions. In countries where lesbians are used to existing separately from the mixed gay movement, they tended to avoid the Internet altogether as a 'male dominated' medium. In other countries, the lesbian activity on Internet might have grown noticeable, once it has been started.

The first widely known women-only mailing list was started in in the U.S. in 1987 by a straight woman who wanted to offer lesbians a place of their own. The sappho list has since grown to a very well known list, with some 700 subscribers at the moment. It remained the only major lesbian space on the Internet until a couple of years ago.

In the early 1990's, some smaller mailing lists were started as outgrowths from sappho. In fact, every lesbian mailing list now in existence can consider the original sappho as the space where it all began. These outgrowths include lists with focus in a wide variety of areas:

*Lesbians in science, political dykes, lesbian mothers, European lesbians, lesbians into s/m, k.d.lang fans, bisexual women, older lesbians, lesbian academics, Australian butches and femmes, lesbian avengers, and so on.*

All of the lists listed above are international: any lesbian with an Internet address or "user account" can subscribe to them. However, the U.S. origins of Internet and the large participation by U.S. users has influenced the lesbian Internet a lot. While there are lesbians from all over the world, the discussions have tended to be dominated by U.S. concerns. For example, while the 'politidykes' list is a forum for general lesbian activist discussion, the topics have often been of interest mainly to U.S. American lesbians.

There have been attempts to make the lesbian Internet more international. [Euro-Sappho](#) is a list which focuses on topics of interest to European lesbians. In Finland there is a national lesbian mailing list called sapfo-list with 120 subscribers. It has been active since 1993.

The function of a lesbian mailing list is usually social: the messages might be chatty, or intimate, or have an erotic tone to them. They might also contain news items, announcements about local events or campaigns. International lists can be a way to keep an international lesbian dialogue alive in such a way that few other media have achieved so far for equally large numbers of lesbians.

It takes some effort to start and maintain a mailing list for lesbians, but once it has been started, it can offer great potential for exchanging information and ideas very quickly.